

The Voice of America

FORUM LECTURES

American Folklore

by Tristram P. Coffin

Literature Series

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American Folklore 1910-1955

Tristram P. Coffin

The peoples of the world possess two types of literature: written and oral. Written literature consists of the material that appears in books and is read by persons of some education. Oral literature is made up of the material that men and women pass on to each other by word of mouth generation after generation. Among a primitive group like the American Indians or the African Bushmen, all the literature is oral. In a society such as that of 20th-century America, most of the literature is written down, although there is a large body of matter (songs, tales, legends, games, rimes, jokes, proverbs, riddles, and superstitions) that people learn from their parents, grandparents, and friends, that they don't write down, and that they never will write down. This matter is the folklore of a modern, civilized nation—and while it is obvious that the less schooling a person has the more likely he is to preserve what he knows of oral literature, even the most highly educated citizen will recall some folklore.

All nations have rich folk heritages, and America offers no exception. Nevertheless, America is a country with a high level of mass education and a vast network of mass communications. As more and more Americans read, listen to the radio, and watch television, fewer and fewer of them bother to learn folklore from memory. Therefore, during the last fifty years the United States has shown a steadily increasing interest in what is a vanishing cultural heritage. American collectors have worked feverishly to uncover and preserve as much of the national folklore as possible before it is all forgotten. The job has been done, on the whole, well. Today, most of the rich and varied folklore of the United States is recorded in books, on tapes and records, and in library archives. Publishers edit and mass distribute it; schools and colleges teach and analyze it; writers develop and embellish it.

However, folklore is like leaves from a tree or shells from the shore. Take it away from its natural surroundings and it fades and loses its full beauty. Folklore flourishes only when it is in oral tradition, where people interchange it and listen to it without recording it in a set, never-to-change-again form. As they relate it or sing it from memory and as others learn it, folklore lives, varying and developing as the people forget parts of it, add parts to it, and adapt parts of it to suit their fancies. This process, which is called oral variation, is the life-blood of folklore. When the process is halted by printing or recording, the folklore involved

ceases to be alive, just as the leaf pressed in the book or the shell sitting on the table is no longer its "real self." Thus, no matter how popular folklore becomes in America, one has to face the fact that American folklore is dying out in this land where more and more citizens use writing and mass communications as a way of expressing their feelings about life.

The fact that folklore is losing its vitality in the United States does not mean that it is unimportant, however, for in it we can still see the dreams and fears and desires of the people who built this country out of a wilderness and who have come to this country to get a fresh start. These people were, at first, mostly from the British Isles. Thus, it is to be expected that the mainstream of American folklore, like Americans themselves, is going to be largely British in background. To be sure, peoples of many other lands have helped build America, but it is also true that in general as they have come to this country they have mixed with the British and allowed their own national heritage to slip away from them over the years. Negro lore, for instance, was originally a mixture of Moorish and African elements, but today is dominated by all sorts of British matter. Nevertheless, one must not forget that along our borders, French to the north and Spanish to the southwest, and in our cities, where many Asiatics, Europeans, and Islanders are gathered, immigrant lores flourish untouched by Anglo-American traditions and patterns.

Culturally, America is extremely diverse. It is also a nation that came into being rapidly and recently. In a nation such as this, it is dangerous to insist that a national folklore, even of British background, exists in any real sense. Certainly, a folklorist would be bold to attempt to treat American folklore as a whole. One does best to follow lines of division—perhaps essentially ethnic ones like those drawn by the American Folklore Society at the time of its founding in 1888. The Society broke American folklore into these parts: 1) relics of British lore; 2) Negro lore; 3) American Indian lore; 4) lore of recent, unacculturated, ethnic groups (the French, the Spanish, the Swedes, and so forth). Such a division marks well the main areas of labor that American folklorists have observed in the 20th century.

However, this is but an initial breakdown. All folk groups in America are affected by their social and economic positions, their levels of education, and their relationships to mass communications. What the various groups accept and reject, what their local attachments are, how reliant they are on their particular traditional practices and heritages—such factors cause a complex cultural interplay within the United States that is almost too intricate to conceive.

The result is that one has to consider regional and occupational divisions along with the ethnic ones. Where a group of distinct racial and linguistic stock exists in some sort of cultural isolation, they will develop regional characteristics that may be more marked than the ethnic ones. This is the case, for example, of the British mountain whites, the

Afro-American Negroes of the Coastal Islands of Georgia and South Carolina, the Pennsylvania Dutch, the Louisiana French, and the New England Yankees. The same is true when the work of the group has led toward isolation extending over long periods. Sailing, lumbering, river-boating, canalling, grazing, railroading, mining, even pioneering are cases in point. In addition, regionalism and occupation frequently combine with ethnic individualities to foster particularly distinct lores such as the Southern slave songs, Mormon tradition, Northern metropolitan Negro toasts, the spirituals of the Southern Upland whites, and the songs of the Shakers.

Thus, one can see that the discussion of even a single ballad or a single superstition in America is a complicated discussion, which may lead up all sorts of ethnic, regional, and occupational paths. On one hand, the same song or story may turn up in many places among many different groups displaying some slight local 'touches. For example, the British music hall ballad, "The Bad Girl's Lament," which tells of the degeneration and death of a prostitute, can be traced throughout the United States, in the hills as a moral lyric, in the Southwest as a dirge about a cowboy who has gone wrong, among the Negroes as a city blues or "sorrow song." A rime like "Eeny meeny miny mo / Catch a nigger by the toe / If he hollers let him go / Eeny meeny miny mo" reflects shepherd chants, French-Canadian children's games, the White-Negro relationships during the days before the Civil War. On the other hand, it is indisputably true that each region, each occupation, and each racial group has preserved a genuine body of lore that is inseparable from local culture. Tales about place names, about local feuds and loyalties, about local features have arisen wherever people have noticed they are different from each other. Frequently, such place lore becomes interlaced with history, as in the South, where colonial, plantation, Civil War, and Reconstruction days all have their respective symbols, heroes, and legends.

To describe, even briefly, the many literary forms that American folklore takes would be a tedious process. The list of folksong types in the United States would alone include three kinds of Anglo-American narrative songs or ballads; the Spanish narrative corrido; an infinite variety of dance and game lyrics; Negro calls, blues, spirituals, and hollers; work songs of many sorts; hymns and white spirituals; primitive Indian chants and prayers; and the various European and British love lyrics. A list of folktale types would include European *märchen*; trickster tales of the Negro and the Indian; numbskull tales of the French and Spanish; local legends concerning ghosts, place names, and geographical features of all sorts; tall tales; primitive Indian myths; and European endless, accumulative, and formula stories. In addition, there are superstitions, sayings, proverbs, and jokes that go with every occupation, racial group, and region in the nation, besides an infinite variety of games, dances, rimes, and such things. The truth of the matter is that folk forms the world over differ very little, and what one finds in the United States is

just about what he would expect to find in any Western nation, with the exception of Negro folk music and the frontier tall tale. The distinguishing features of American folklore are not so much in form as in the close interplay of racial and regional groups, in the steady influence of print and commercialism, and in the everchanging nature of American society.

America is, of course, the melting pot of the world. In America, people of all races, creeds, and languages have mixed their blood, their cultures, and their hopes. Folklore in a real sense symbolizes this union, and there is an obvious democratic appeal to the fact that American oral literature is too complex for simple description, that American songs or tales move from group to group transcending ethnic, linguistic, intellectual barriers.

Actually, the growth of interest in folklore in America stands in direct proportion to the growth of American influence across the world. During the years surrounding the two World Wars, the United States has been concerned with its own heritage as it has gone about the job of explaining itself to other peoples. Scholars, writers, and entertainers have fed the public desire to know their neighbors and to know themselves. The complex of folklore has offered an appropriate and endless source of supply.

Perhaps the best way to understand the popularity of folklore in America from 1910-1955 is to look at the people who are the folklorists themselves. As one might expect, they are a mixed breed. Anthropologists, housewives, historians, literature teachers and such by profession, they have approached their discipline as amateurs, collectors, commercialists, and scholars, or as some combination of the four. They have widely varying backgrounds and tastes, and as a group share little "esprit de corps."

The outlook for the amateur, for instance, is usually dependent on his fondness for local history or the picturesque. His love of folklore has romanticism in it, and may reflect nostalgia for "the good old days" or simply love for his home town or ancestor's race. Folklore is his hobby, and he, all too rightly, insists that it remain as such. The amateur is closely related to the collector, who is actually the amateur who has taken to the field. The collector enjoys contact with people; he hunts folklore for the very "field and stream" reasons that many persons hunt game. Only rarely is he acutely concerned with the meaning of what he has located. During the early years of the 20th century, when it was first realized that American folklore was vanishing, he had his great era.

But there are also the commercialists and the scholars—one dominated by money, the other by a desire to discover the truth about American life and culture. Both are primarily concerned with the uses that can be made of the material the collector has brought home. Both shudder at the thought of proceeding too far beyond the sewage system and the electric light lines. The commercialist gets along well with the amateur, on whose nostalgias he feeds, but he frequently steps on the toes of the

scholar by refusing to keep his material genuine. He wants to tinker with and embellish folklore in order to give it the greatest commercial appeal. His standards are completely foreign to those of the scholar. To both the amateur and the commercialist, the scholar lacks a soul, lacks appreciation with his endless probings and classifications. Dominated by the vicious circle of the university promotion system, the scholar looks down on and gets along poorly with the other three groups, although he cannot deny his debt to the collector.

In the years from 1910-1955 all of these types have been able to flourish and develop their distinctions. The amateurs, the commercialists, and the collectors have brought out book after book and record after record of the folklore of almost every conceivable ethnic, regional, and occupational group in America. The scholars have probed the complicated histories of British ballads like "The Maid Freed from the Gallows," American Negro songs like "John Henry," American Indian myths like "The Star Husband," French customs like "La Guillannée," and so forth. The groups have warred over the legitimacy of re-arranging folksongs, over the ritual connections of myths and tales, over the folk groups that can claim to have originated this song and that game. The result has been a mass of books of varying quality that crowd our libraries, the successful launchings of four major and a host of minor folklore journals, a surfeit of records of folksongs and folk dances, a rapid development of courses in all aspects of American and World folklore throughout American schools and colleges.

To be sure, the knowledge that most Americans have of folklore has come through contact with the commercialists who have reached the largest audience. The work done by the collectors and the scholars, the men who deeply care about folk literature, has had the limited appeal that any other work of a truly scientific sort always has. As a result, while the American public has been exposed to huge amounts of its folk heritage in recent years, most Americans have a rather hazy idea of what folklore really is. They have been exposed to folklore not as it was originally taken from the mouths of folk informants, but rather after it has been modified that it may sell. Folklore is almost always objective, amoral, and cruel when found in its natural state; folksongs are often in archaic keys and difficult to listen to; much of the narrative matter is obscene. However, when it is presented on American records and over American bookstore counters, it is certain to be sentimental, moral, and even cute, the music transposed into familiar modes and dressed up with commercial clichés, the obscenities glossed over. Thus, most Americans have little idea of the power, energy, and originality that lies in their folklore. Rather they see it as quaint, entertaining, of passing value.

If we look at what has happened commercially to American folksong in the last fifty years, we can get a pretty clear idea of what all forms of American folklore have been subjected to since the First World War.

The details may differ for tales or for superstitions, but the pattern will not vary much from form to form.

In the 20th century, there have been three big commercial movements that have caused a great interest in folksong singing in the United States. The first of these is the hill-billy movement. Record companies learned right after the First World War that the public would buy recordings of songs by country folk. Thus, they went to rural areas and recorded singers. These singers were mostly British upland whites from the Ozark and Southern Appalachian regions. The songs they sang were genuine Anglo-American folksongs. However, it was soon found that it was easier to bring the country folk to the city or to have city singers imitate the country style. From these imitations the tradition of hill-billy singing grew up. Now, most of the songs sung by hill-billy singers are written by men in the music business. Their mood is sentimental, moral, and monotonous, where the folksong is stark, indifferent, and varied. Thousands upon thousands of them are played and sung over American mass media outlets. The hill country is flooded with them and today even the hill singers prefer them to the more traditional songs. Although hill-billy singing is often equated in the mind of the American public with folk singing, the relationship is now extremely distant except in a few isolated cases.

The second great movement was the labor movement. Late in the 19th century and early in the 20th, union organizers discovered that folksongs had great appeal to the workers in the factories and mines as they struggled to better their lot. Soon the singing of folksongs about hardship, the re-writing of folksongs so they dealt with hardship, and the composing of songs in the folk manner was being encouraged as a means of protesting against Big Business and the advantages Big Businessmen were taking of the employees. During the late thirties this vogue of singing appropriate and doctored folksongs spread from the unions to a wider audience interested in a broader protest of a political and social nature. Influenced by current, popular musical trends, such songs reached a broader and broader audience and eventually began to vie with the products of dance music and hill-billy writers for the attention of record buyers and radio-TV listeners. By the 1950's almost any group dressing in a rural fashion and calling itself a folk group could sing this music and be assured of steady engagements and a good crop of listeners.

Finally, jazz has brought to America's radio stations and television outlets a great many Negro folksongs. Jazz, which began in New Orleans as a mixture of Negro field calls and spirituals, country and urban "sorrow songs" or blues, European band music, and various piano styles, has swept over the nation and the world. Wherever it is played, the blues are sung—and the blues are a genuine form of American folksong. Rising from the playing and singing of the Negroes, especially the street singers in the Southern towns and cities, the blues originally

expressed the sadness and hardship of the lonely black in a white man's world. Later the whites took over the form to express their own trouble and pain. As the Negroes and the hill-billies came North and went into the entertainment business, they brought the blues with them. The blues have been popular on the radio and in nightclubs; they have been copied and rewritten by whites and blacks alike; and they have lived in their folk form in the Negro districts of the huge cities and Southern farmlands.

However, if we are to survey a form, such as the folksong, to observe the steady commercialization of American folklore from 1910-1955, we ought also to look at a form, such as the tall tale, to observe the basic American characteristics that reveal themselves in the face of the regional, occupational, and ethnic distinctions. The tall tale developed in rural America and on the frontier during the early 19th century. A loose, rambling story of personal experience, this typically American form of anecdote-telling is presented casually, in an off-hand manner, with utmost solemnity in the face of the most preposterous incidents. Much of the detail is irrelevant; the climax is usually bathetic; and the purpose is really to "take in" the listener. Hoaxes, marvels, and scrapes are the tall tale teller's stock in trade.

The tall tale is, of course, uniquely American, a true product of the many races and groups that flooded onto our Western frontier. Its heroes are divided between the prosaic Yankee—whose virtues are industry, perseverance, thrift, "know-how," and cunningness—and the Western brawler—whose virtues are courage, brawn, brute force, and animal cleverness. These heroes are a picaresque type of foot-loose adventurer, the result and symbol of a society cut loose from its roots. In the thin line that separates law-enforcement from law-breaking on the frontier, both the good bad man and the bad good man are glorified. Davy Crockett tricks the barkeep by trading the same coonskin again and again for drinks, he grins the bark off a tree, rassles bears, and ends up in Congress. Mike Fink squabbles, drinks, and robs his way along the Mississippi, but helps an honest man get a start in life. Wild Bill Hickok shoots his initials in telegraph poles as he rides by, and is himself shot in the back.

These are the stories from American folklore that the American public knows best and likes best. The frontier ideal of the resourceful, outdoor individualist is far preferred to the character-types that emerge from the European *märchen*, from the Negro animal story, and from the other narrative forms the folk have to offer. America has always been proud of its star performers, its master workmen, its lusty, blustering champions, and it pays continual tribute to the heroes that have arisen from our tall tales. States claim to be the home of Pecos Bill, the marvellous cowboy, or of Paul Bunyan, the wonder-working lumberman. Negroes name their children after John Henry of steel-driving fame. Festivals and carnivals honor the apple-planter Johnny Appleseed or the railroad daredevil Casey Jones.

Although folksongs and tall tales have had the greatest commercial distribution in the United States and thus have become the best-known types of folk literature, this does not mean that other forms have not had their distribution too. Most Americans are familiar with Old World märchen taken from the Mountain Whites, the French, and the Spanish; with the trickster stories of the African Negro, if not with the trickster stories of the American Indian; with dance games derived from the frontier square dances and play-parties; with local superstitions and customs, such as dowsing or water-witching, prophesying weather, curing warts, and controlling luck; with a few riddles, rimes, and jokes; and with the legends characteristic of their native groups. A few have seen "Los Pastores," the medieval Spanish dramas still acted in the Southwest; the French New Year's celebration "La Guillannée"; or some other traditional ceremony. Folk festivals and folk carnivals of one sort or another have grown quite popular in the United States, and each year sees ethnic, regional, and occupational groups displaying their customs and costumes, telling their tales, dancing and singing their songs in an effort to promote better understanding and mutual self-respect in this polyglot nation. For example, the National Folk Festival held every spring in the South brings together performers, scholars, and amateurs of folklore from all over the country and is given wide publicity in newspapers and magazines, while each month some group—the lumbermen, the Finns, the Mountain Whites, an American Indian tribe—holds some sort of revival or carnival.

Looking back over this discussion of folklore in the United States from 1910-1955, one sees that three theses have emerged: 1) that American folklore is an exceptionally complex and intricate interplay of regional, occupational, and ethnic forces; 2) that the great vogue of American folklore is related to our desire to explain ourselves to the world; and 3) that folklore has been ever-increasingly commercialized as its popularity has grown. And one realizes that American folklore has developed in an age of print and rapid national change when the urges of nostalgia and local pride have been strong. As a result, Americans have been extraordinarily anxious to retain for posterity as much of their heritage as possible. They have treasured more carefully than other lands local traditions, memories, and bric-a-brac. While this preservation has been helter-skelter as often as not, on the whole the storehouse of American lore built up is amazingly full.

What is in this storehouse does symbolize the nation. America is a new, young, big land, mirroring rapid changes from agricultural to urban life. The people are a mixture. So is the culture. In America, men have become heroes in their own lifetimes and living story-tellers encompass within their memories the entire history of a community or a profession such as canalling or river-boating. Such a nation is all things to all people and immensely difficult to label. Its folklore is endlessly fascinating, if impossible to define.

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